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WALT WHITMAN AND A MODERN PROBLEM

It has been now forty-seven years since Walt Whitman was dismissed from his clerkship in the Indian Office because of the content of some poems included in the 1860 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Perhaps the loss of his position did not come to Whitman with a shock of surprise, for it is evident that he regarded himself as a teacher of advanced doctrines; and the fate of prophet and seer has almost ever been rejection or worse. But Whitman had already written his faith in the ultimate triumph of any message of truth, however much it might, with the kindling power of genius, be lighting the mountain-tops of thought while the mass of men remained in the darkness below. He has told us of America that—

“If its poets appear, it will in due time advance to meet them—
there is no fear of mistake.

(The proof of a poet shall be sternly deferr'd, till his country
absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.)”

Within very recent times the thought of the world has undergone, or at least is clearly beginning to undergo, a revolution regarding problems connected with sex. Societies and journals for the study of eugenics have been founded and the “conspiracy of silence” is being broken. In other words, America and other countries where his doctrines have penetrated have “in due time advanced to meet” Whitman, their teacher. It will be interesting to note just how far Whitman has anticipated this new thought and is yet in advance of it, and just how far the growing tolerance which marks the discussion of phenomena connected with sex may be traceable to him.

When Whitman decides to throw light upon the subject of sex he is not dealing with an attitude of a generation only; nor has he the mere inertia of indifference to overcome. The secret of much of our attitude in such matters must be sought for in the Middle Ages, when, in order to keep their undivided allegiance, celibacy was forced, by the Church or by their order, upon the intellectual leaders, monk and friar, of the centuries when modern thought was shaping itself from the ruins of a

classic and pagan past. Then it was that the vileness of woman and the degrading effects of all relations with her were taught to mankind as a measure whereby the power of the Church might be exalted. The spell of Rome was over the race, and seldom is a voice lifted in protest. The irreverent might snigger in the shade, but a reasoned and scientific attitude he never had. The race must be continued. Therefore woman must be tolerated. If she were valuable as a beast of burden, that was an added asset. The silence is broken only once by a daring voice, a voice half of jest, as not realizing the weight with which its words are charged and all unconscious of the new world of thought thus dimly illuminated. It is the voice of Chaucer at the end of the fourteenth century. In the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer represents the Host as turning to the Monk for a story. His eye is struck by the fullness of the physical life before him, and doubtless he reflects likewise upon the superior mental equipment of this monk. So he pronounces a half-humorous anathema upon the Church because it had kept from aiding in the production of a superior race one so well fitted in every respect to pass on the torch of life. Had he his way, every man, even though his crown were shaven, should have a wife, for, he continues, the laity are but "shrimpes," and from a feeble stock comes a feeble scion.

But in this, as in so many other things, Chaucer is outrunning his contemporaries (witness Richard Rolle, the saint of the century) by many generations. It remains for a poet in a land undreamed of by Chaucer to advocate in earnest and with some scientific insight what was to him but uncorrelated observation and a jest.

As a natural corollary to the mediæval view regarding questions of sex there came the attitude towards the human body. The body must be disregarded, nay mortified and attenuated, if the vows of the Church were to be kept in spirit as in deed. Hence the ideal of the holy man drinking water only and feeding upon pulse; hence the skeleton-like saints that fill such a large section of our galleries: the soul must be saved at any cost. True enough there is the Renaissance with its theory of beauty, the cult of the individual, and its frank

insistence upon the claims of the flesh, but there is also the counteracting influence of Puritanism; and the sum total of attitude remains unchanged or is but slowly changing as we approach the nineteenth century.

When, then, we find a collected edition of Whitman's poems beginning,—

“Of Physiology from top to toe I sing;
Not physiognomy alone, nor brain alone, is worthy for the muse.
I say the Form complete is worthier far;
The Female equally with the male I sing”,—

we feel that a note which is practically new in its entirety has come into literature. And when we reflect upon the meaning of the last line we are impressed with the fact that a literary doctrine as revolutionary as the dethronement of the hero of noble blood has taken place. Another step of even greater import than this first has been taken towards the democratizing of human thought. Not a class, merely, has been admitted to suffrage, but one half of the race.

Whitman thus becomes the poet of the human form. He sings not only of the mere physical strength of the form, such as flashed in the sunlight of the palestra or drew the plaudits of the ampitheatre, but of the human form, male or female, in its dignity of sex.

If the dignity of the human body as a whole can be established, it must needs follow that it is in all its functions dignified. Whitman again and again addresses himself to the proof of the glory of our physical self. The body is, verily, not less than the soul itself, for—

“Behold! the body includes and is the meaning, the main concern —
and includes and is the Soul;
Whoever you are! how superb and how divine is your body, or
any part of it.”

What a distance has Whitman's mind travelled from the monkish idea that the body was a contaminated dwelling in which the pure soul was temporarily imprisoned before its great translation. One of the very few great voices of the Middle Ages has said, “Praised be the Lord for our sister, the death of the body, from whom no man escapeth.” Far more of sunshine

there is in this hymn than can be found in almost any other religious literature of the period, with its sad refrain rather of—

"Timor Mortis conturbat me."

Yet even here the Lord is praised for unlocking the soul from its prison body.

But Dunbar and St. Francis died long ago; and perhaps before Whitman appears other men have exalted the body as a fit tenement of the soul. A test for this supposition is at hand. In 1844 Thomas Hood wrote, in a moment of genuine inspiration, *The Bridge of Sighs*. It is hardly worth while to remind anyone that the subject of this poem is a woman of the street who has committed suicide. What does Hood see here? He has a broader charity than the priest extended to poor Ophelia. Her sins are for her Saviour to judge, not for him. But dominant through it all surges his sense of the pity of her fate:—

“Alas ! for the rarity
Of Christian charity,—

Near a whole city full,
Home she had none.”

Beautiful she was, young and slender, with auburn tresses, but he does not dwell upon this cunning mechanism arrested forever. The worthy part of her is elsewhere, suing for the mercy which the world, in her mad life's history, never showed. It is the viewpoint of Hood's generation ; and after all it is the viewpoint that some genius of unusually tender nature might have showed centuries before Hood. It is perhaps the voice of Chaucer as he likens the face of Constance to that of the prisoner led to his death.

Turn now to *The City Dead-House* of Whitman. The subject is the same—one more unfortunate. But how different is the attitude of the two men! What Whitman sees in the corpse before him is—

“The divine woman, her body—I see the Body—I look on it alone,
That house once full of passion and beauty—all else I notice not;
Nor stillness so cold, nor running water from faucet, nor odors morbid
impress me;
But the house alone — that wondrous house — that delicate fair,

That immortal house, more than all the rows of buildings ever built!
 Or white-domed Capitol itself, with majestic figure surmounted—or all
 the old high-spired cathedrals;
 That little house alone, more than them all—poor, desperate house!
 Fair, fearful wreck! tenement of a Soul! itself a Soul!"

It is the House of Life not lesser nor greater than the soul, for one cannot exist without the other; and in the great scheme of the universe one is as immortal as the other. With Whitman it is the human body "itself a Soul," a worthy tenant of a worthy house, that is of importance. With Hood and his generation it is the mortal pity of it all—the homeless, friendless wanderer under the city's glare, descending ever nearer the slimy grasp of the clammy river ooze. With a broader charity Whitman passes over this aspect of the tragedy to lament the ruin of this cunning mechanism. The body is to him sacred, and though its elements are immortal, never again will the same finger answer brain or eye kindle with love. A long translation is before the body in its dim wanderings:—

"We are nature—long have we been absent, but now we return;
 We become plants, leaves, foliage, roots, bark";

and it is only after eons that we arrive home again:—

"A few quadrillions of eras, a few octillions of cubic leagues, do
 not hazard the span or make it impatient."

The moral and the religious sides of the matter receive but a glance from Whitman. His was a large tolerance and a patience that was remarkable among mankind. He represents himself as seeing the deeds of oppression done upon the earth and hearing the groans of the oppressed in silence. Perhaps it was given to him above other men to hear that these things were but apparent discords in that great final celestial harmony. At any rate it is enough at present if we realize clearly the place of dignity to which Whitman has elevated the human body in spite of the religious forces which had been acting through the centuries and are acting yet.

Having, then, acquitted the body, and established its place as a worthy one in the great scheme of the universe, and having shown that it is as immortal as the soul, Whitman, if we have so far accepted him, is in a position to take another step in advance.

There are few indeed among enlightened nations of to-day who do not believe in the dignity of the body and the desirability of cultivating in it the qualities of strength and beauty. Organizations on all sides of us bear witness to this. The athlete has become a type admired by all. The starved saint has disappeared.

But if the body as a whole has been given its due place, not all of its most vital functions have been recognized, save perhaps by a few. It is here that the teaching of Whitman is most advanced and most vital: he sets himself the problem of becoming the medium for the—

“Voice of sexes—by me clarified and transfigured.”

There is nothing indecent, he tells us, connected with the origin of life. In that assertion he has advanced a long way from the church fathers of the Middle Ages. Such a thinker as Emerson protests with him, and he loses his position. His name becomes a term of reproach with many. Clearly he was in advance of his time. “But it [the world] does move,” murmured another great thinker who had dared to be in advance of his time, and science has accepted his view. In like manner, science and humanity at large have accepted or are accepting Whitman's declaration that sex has a right to a place of dignity in the best and purest aspirations of the race.

Were sex an isolated phenomenon there would be no need that anyone should dwell upon it, but—

“Sex contains all,—

Bodies, Souls, meanings, proofs, purities, delicacies, results, promulgations,

All hopes, benefactions, bestowals,

All the passions, loves, beauties, delights of the earth,

All the governments, judges, gods, follow'd persons of the earth,—

These are contain'd in sex, as part of itself and justification of itself.”

Elsewhere he has told us what everyone knows but what few realize—that the race is never separated and that the future will find its past in us. Its blessings or its curse will rest upon us according as we transmit the fullness of life—mental, moral, and physical—to it, or are untrue to our opportunities and transmit an existence impoverished of one or all of these. There is no

evasion. Every link that we add to the chain of life must strain or snap under the stress to which it is to be subjected.

One of the most illuminated pages in American life is that which shows us Walt Whitman nursing the wounded of both armies in the tragic hospitals of Washington during the Civil War. Testimony in superabundance bears witness to the rare charm of his soothing presence. He might easily have been thinking of himself when he says in *To a Pupil* :—

“Do you not see how it would serve to have such a Body and Soul, that when you enter the crowd, an atmosphere of desire and command enters with you, and every one is impressed with your personality?”

Doubtless this personal magnetism was in part due to an easy atmosphere of comradeship with which he was always invested. This in turn may be traced largely to the city environment of his youth and early manhood. But in part it must have been inherited. Time and again we find Whitman returning to his own parentage. He was, he insists,—

“Well-begotten, and rais'd by a perfect mother.”

Physically and mentally he was a good example of the doctrine which he taught—the necessity of being born well. This expression “being born well” has attached to itself a meaning which, it is worth while noting as we pass, Whitman is the last one to admit. He is the type, if ever there was one, of the democrat, and anyone who is brought into the world with capacities, mental and physical, for conquering his environment and enjoying life with a keen zest at the same time is with him well born. Like Thoreau, he has a lordly indifference to the adventitious fact of property. What the eye sees, that spiritually it possesses, both tell us. To inherit worldly riches and social position at birth was, with Whitman, not necessarily to be well born. In fact, such things were apt to be a handicap.

If Whitman was, as has been said above, of such splendid physical presence, it is but natural that he should insist upon the purely physical side of eugenics. The woman he loves must be “strong and arrogant” and “well muscled.” Her body must be perfect; for only from a perfect body can come the

physical perfection which Whitman demands for "these States." The habits of his daily life had, it seems, helped to accentuate the place which the purely physical holds in the doctrine of Whitman. The measurements taken of soldiers during the Civil War show what a superb physical manhood was to be found in the American of the mid-nineteenth century. Few men of the period knew this more fully than Whitman. His natural tastes and his various occupations combined with his travel to bring him into immediate contact with that class of our population which put most emphasis upon the physical side of its nature.

But it was the healthy contact of natural man. Whatever experiences Whitman may have had with men and women they were natural experiences, and if at any time they may have run counter to the attitude of man in his most strongly marked stages of moral conventionality, they were such as nature had sanctioned. What he has to tell us, then, ought to shock us no more than if nature had spoken to us frankly and directly. When he speaks about sex there is nothing in his words that conveys the subtly deteriorating influences of artificiality. It is this largeness and naturalness of attitude that saves Whitman from being immoral in his consideration of the physical aspect of sex. The danger of the innuendo, of the carefully prepared suggestion of situation, is absent from his pages. In many a novel of past and of present popularity both of these are used with telling effect. But society, as a whole, is deciding more and more against the salacious insinuation of the novel and for the message of nature which Whitman brings. If Whitman has not yet fully carried all men with him in his "proof" that sex is illustrious, he seems at least to have convinced them that there is a better way of approaching the question than that of Boccaccio and of Balzac, and of other later and more dangerous authors.

But if all that Whitman has to tell us about sex is purely physical and merely non-moral, we cannot say that he is either really a great teacher or a prophet. He has, however, something more to show us than the mere physical dignity of sex. If he got no further than this he would still be abreast with the

tardy scientific thought of the present time, though his message would be largely exhausted.

His true message, however, is not yet fully realized. What he has to say to us finally is that sex has also its spiritual aspect. It was this message in his poems upon sex that caused Mrs. Gilchrist, one of the gifted women of the last century, in writing to Rossetti to say of them: [It is not the] "heights brought down to the depths, but the depths lifted up level with the sunlit heights, that they might become clear and sunlit too." Mrs. Gilchrist has seen the quality of supersensual love and of spiritual emotion which most of the earlier readers of Whitman failed to find.

Whitman insists upon—

"The great chastity of paternity, to match the great chastity of maternity."

He has seen and put into words what Raphael has arrested for us in the faces of his Madonnas,—

"The illuminated face of the mother of many children."

The feeling which the man of the Middle Ages extended to only one divine mother, Whitman in his democracy extends to all. Nothing is greater, he tells, us than the mother of men. Each and every woman is an "inimitable poem." This last phrase might easily have been used by a score of poets of our language, from those to whom a woman was a poem of color and form alone to the lushly erotic. But with Whitman the greatness of man is a greatness through all eternity, and from the woman alone comes, and can come, this greatness. Of the female form he says,—

"A divine nimbus exhales from it from head to foot."

There is no more spiritual view in the English language of the transmission of life than that which Whitman expresses in *Starting from Paumanok*. Life is not passed on merely physically. The spirituality of the next generation is largely determined in its creation by this one: our aspirations are not ours alone but something—

"Subtle, clandestine, away beyond,
A charge transmitted and gift occult, for those being born."

That Whitman should advocate the dignity of the human body as a whole in opposition to the teaching of centuries shows that he is a brave man and an advanced thinker. That he should point out to mankind that subjects which it had treated with obscene jests or, at least, with incriminating silence were fraught with spiritual significance, shows that he is a great spiritual leader. The days when his message was accepted, save by indeed a few, were not the days of his physical existence. But he is now coming, and shall come, into the best and purest aspirations of our life.

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